

Historic US-Iran nuclear deal could be taking shape

Written by John Hallam

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By GEORGE JAHN and BRADLEY KLAPPER

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, center, returns to his hotel after walking on the bank of Lake Geneva, following a bilateral meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif for a new round of nuclear talks in Geneva, Switzerland, Monday, Feb. 23, 2015. (AP Photo/Keystone, Salvatore Di Nolfi)

GENEVA (AP) - Edging toward a historic compromise, the U.S. and Iran reported progress Monday on a deal that would clamp down on Tehran's nuclear activities for at least 10 years but then slowly ease restrictions on programs that could be used to make atomic arms.

Officials said there were still obstacles to overcome before a March 31 deadline, and any deal will face harsh opposition in both countries. It also would be sure to further strain already-tense U.S. relations with Israel, whose leaders oppose any agreement that doesn't end Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to strongly criticize the deal in an address before Congress next week.

Still, a comprehensive pact could ease 35 years of U.S-Iranian enmity - and seems within reach for the first time in more than a decade of negotiations.

"We made progress," U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said as he bade farewell to members of the American delegation at the table with Iran. More discussions between Iran and the six nations engaging it were set for next Monday, a senior U.S. official said.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said the sides found "a better understanding" at the negotiating table.

Western officials familiar with the talks cited movement but also described the discussions as a moving target, meaning changes in any one area would have repercussions for other parts of the negotiation.

The core idea would be to reward Iran for good behavior over the last years of any agreement, gradually lifting constraints on its uranium

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enrichment and slowly easing economic sanctions.

Iran says it does not want nuclear arms and needs enrichment only for energy, medical and scientific purposes, but the U.S. fears Tehran could re-engineer the program to produce the fissile core of a nuclear weapon.

The U.S. initially sought restrictions lasting up to 20 years; Iran has pushed for less than a decade. The prospective deal appears to be somewhere in the middle.

One variation being discussed would place at least a 10-year regime of strict controls on Iran's uranium enrichment. If Iran complied, the restrictions would be gradually lifted over the final five years.

One issue critics are certain to focus on: Once the deal expired, Iran could theoretically ramp up enrichment to whatever level it wanted.

Experts say Iran already could produce the equivalent of one weapon's worth of enriched uranium with its present operating 10,000 centrifuges. Several officials spoke of 6,500 centrifuges as a potential point of compromise, with the U.S. trying to restrict them to Iran's mainstay IR-1 model instead of more advanced machines.

However, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said last year that his country needed to increase its output equivalent to at least 190,000 of its present-day centrifuges.

Under a possible agreement, Iran also would be forced to ship out most of the enriched uranium it produced or change it to a form that would be difficult to convert for weapons use. It takes about one ton of low-enriched uranium to process into a nuclear weapon, and officials said that Tehran could be restricted to an enriched stockpile of no more than about 700 pounds.

The officials represent different countries among the six world powers negotiating with Iran - the United States, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk publicly about the negotiations.

Formal relations between the U.S. and Iran, severed during the Iranian revolution and hostage crisis in 1979, have progressively improved since moderate Iranian President Hassan Rouhani took office in 2013. Further reconciliation would help the West in a region where Iran holds considerable sway and the U.S. is increasingly involved in the struggle against Islamic extremists.

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But even if the two sides agree to a preliminary deal in March and a follow-up pact in June, such a two-phase arrangement will face fierce criticism from Congress and Israel, both of which will argue it fails to significantly curb Tehran's nuclear weapons potential.

Israel was already weighing in.

Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon warned that such a deal would represent "a great danger" to the Western world and said it "will allow Iran to become a nuclear threshold state."

In Washington, President Barack Obama has been trying to keep Congress from passing new sanctions against Iran that he says could scuttle further diplomacy and rekindle the threat of a new Mideast war.

Iranian hardliners fearing a sellout of their country's nuclear program may also pressure Rouhani, although he appears secure as long as a deal is supported by Khamenei.

The U.N's International Atomic Energy Agency would have responsibility for monitoring, and any deal would depend on technical safeguards rather than Iranian guarantees.

The IAEA already is monitoring Iranian compliance with an interim agreement that came into force a year ago and has given Tehran good marks. Separately, it also oversees Tehran's nuclear programs to ensure they remain peaceful.

Its attempts to follow up on suspicions that Iran once worked on nuclear arms are deadlocked however, with Iran saying such allegations are based on phony evidence from the U.S. and Israel.

That stalled probe and other issues that the U.S. says must be part of any final deal could remain unresolved by June, opening any agreement to further criticism.

For the United States, the goal is to extend to at least a year the period that Iran would need to surreptitiously "break out" toward nuclear weapons development. Daryl Kimball of the Washington-based Arms Control Association said that with the IAEA's additional monitoring, the deal taking shape leaves "more than enough time to detect and disrupt any effort to pursue nuclear weapons in the future."

In exchange, Iran wants relief from sanctions crippling its economy

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and the U.S. is talking about phasing in such measures.

Associated Press writers Ian Deitch in Jerusalem and Josh Lederman in Washington contributed

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/23/leaked-spy-cables-netanyahu-iran-bomb-mossad>

Leaked cables show Netanyahu's Iran bomb claim contradicted by Mossad

Gulf between Israeli secret service and PM revealed in documents shared with the Guardian along with other secrets including CIA bids to contact Hamas

- Read the leaked document here

Netanyahu's Iran bomb claim contradicted by Mossad, leaked spy cables show

Seumas Milne, Ewen MacAskill and Clayton Swisher

Tuesday 24 February 2015 05.06 AEDT Last modified on Tuesday 24 February 2015 11.30 AEDT

Binyamin Netanyahu's dramatic declaration to world leaders in 2012 that Iran was about a year away from making a nuclear bomb was contradicted by his own secret service, according to a top-secret Mossad document.

It is part of a cache of hundreds of dossiers, files and cables from the world's major intelligence services – one of the biggest spy leaks in recent times.

Brandishing a cartoon of a bomb with a red line to illustrate his point, the Israeli prime minister warned the UN in New York that Iran would be able to build nuclear weapons the following year and called for action to halt the process.

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But in a secret report shared with South Africa a few weeks later, Israel's intelligence agency concluded that Iran was "not performing the activity necessary to produce weapons". The report highlights the gulf between the public claims and rhetoric of top Israeli politicians and the assessments of Israel's military and intelligence establishment.

An extract from the document Photograph: The Guardian

The disclosure comes as tensions between Israel and its staunchest ally, the US, have dramatically increased ahead of Netanyahu's planned address to the US Congress on 3 March.

Advertisement

The White House fears the Israeli leader's anticipated inflammatory rhetoric could damage sensitive negotiations between Tehran and the world's six big powers over Iran's nuclear programme. The deadline to agree on a framework is in late March, with the final settlement to come on 30 June. Netanyahu has vowed to block an agreement he claims would give Iran access to a nuclear weapons capability.

The US president, Barack Obama, will not meet Netanyahu during his visit, saying protocol precludes a meeting so close to next month's general election in Israel.

The documents, almost all marked as confidential or top secret, span almost a decade of global intelligence traffic, from 2006 to December last year. It has been leaked to the al-Jazeera investigative unit and shared with the Guardian.

The papers include details of operations against al-Qaida, Islamic State and other terrorist organisations, but also the targeting of environmental activists.

The files reveal that:

- The CIA attempted to establish contact with Hamas in spite of a US ban.
- South Korean intelligence targeted the leader of Greenpeace.
- Barack Obama "threatened" the Palestinian president to withdraw a bid for recognition of Palestine at the UN.
- South African intelligence spied on Russia over a controversial \$100m joint satellite deal.

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The cache, which has been independently authenticated by the Guardian, mainly involves exchanges between South Africa's intelligence agency and its counterparts around the world. It is not the entire volume of traffic but a selective leak.

One of the biggest hauls is from Mossad. But there are also documents from Russia's FSB, which is responsible for counter-terrorism. Such leaks of Russian material are extremely rare.

Other spy agencies caught up in the trawl include those of the US, Britain, France, Jordan, the UAE, Oman and several African nations.

The scale of the leak, coming 20 months after US whistleblower Edward Snowden handed over tens of thousands of NSA and GCHQ documents to the Guardian, highlights the increasing inability of intelligence agencies to keep their secrets secure.

While the Snowden trove revealed the scale of technological surveillance, the latest spy cables deal with espionage at street level – known to the intelligence agencies as human intelligence, or “humint”. They include surveillance reports, inter-agency information trading, disinformation and backbiting, as well as evidence of infiltration, theft and blackmail.

The leaks show how Africa is becoming increasingly important for global espionage, with the US and other western states building up their presence on the continent and China expanding its economic influence. One serving intelligence officer told the Guardian: “South Africa is the El Dorado of espionage.”

Africa has also become caught up in the US, Israeli and British covert global campaigns to stem the spread of Iranian influence, tighten sanctions and block its nuclear programme.

The Mossad briefing about Iran's nuclear programme in 2012 was in stark contrast to the alarmist tone set by Netanyahu, who has long presented the Iranian nuclear programme as an existential threat to Israel and a huge risk to world security. The Israeli prime minister told the UN: “By next spring, at most by next summer, at current enrichment rates, they will have finished the medium enrichment and move[d] on to the final stage. From there, it's only a few months, possibly a few weeks before they get enough enriched uranium for the first bomb.”

He said his information was not based on secret information or

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military intelligence but International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports.

Behind the scenes, Mossad took a different view. In a report shared with South African spies on 22 October 2012 – but likely written earlier – it conceded that Iran was “working to close gaps in areas that appear legitimate, such as enrichment reactors, which will reduce the time required to produce weapons from the time the instruction is actually given”.

But the report also states that Iran “does not appear to be ready” to enrich uranium to the higher levels necessary for nuclear weapons. To build a bomb requires enrichment to 90%. Mossad estimated that Iran then had “about 100kg of material enriched to 20%” (which was later diluted or converted under the terms of the 2013 Geneva agreement). Iran has always said it is developing a nuclear programme for civilian energy purposes.

Last week, Netanyahu’s office repeated the claim that “Iran is closer than ever today to obtaining enriched material for a nuclear bomb” in a statement in response to an IAEA report.

A senior Israeli government official said there was no contradiction between Netanyahu’s statements on the Iranian nuclear threat and “the quotes in your story – allegedly from Israeli intelligence”. Both the prime minister and Mossad said Iran was enriching uranium in order to produce weapons, he added.

“Israel believes the proposed nuclear deal with Iran is a bad deal, for it enables the world’s foremost terror state to create capabilities to produce the elements necessary for a nuclear bomb,” he said.

However, Mossad had been at odds with Netanyahu on Iran before. The former Mossad chief Meir Dagan, who left office in December 2010, let it be known that he had opposed an order from Netanyahu to prepare a military attack on Iran.

Other members of Israel’s security establishment were riled by Netanyahu’s rhetoric on the Iranian nuclear threat and his advocacy of military confrontation. In April 2012, a former head of Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security agency, accused Netanyahu of “messianic” political leadership for pressing for military action, saying he and the then defence minister, Ehud Barak, were misleading the public on the Iran issue. Benny Gantz, the Israeli military chief of staff, said decisions on tackling Iran “must be made carefully, out of historic

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responsibility but without hysteria”.

There were also suspicions in Washington that Netanyahu was seeking to bounce Obama into taking a more hawkish line on Iran.

A few days before Netanyahu’s speech to the UN, the then US defence secretary, Leon Panetta, accused the Israeli prime minister of trying to force the US into a corner. “The fact is ... presidents of the United States, prime ministers of Israel or any other country ... don’t have, you know, a bunch of little red lines that determine their decisions,” he said.

“What they have are facts that are presented to them about what a country is up to, and then they weigh what kind of action is needed in order to deal with that situation. I mean, that’s the real world. Red lines are kind of political arguments that are used to try to put people in a corner.”

<http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-02-23/while-us-and-iran-pursue-nuclear-arms-deal-their-cyber-war-continues>

While the US and Iran pursue a nuclear arms deal, their cyberwar continues

PRI's The World

February 23, 2015 · 4:30 PM EST
Producer Bradley Campbell (follow)

US Secretary of State John Kerry shakes hands with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif before a meeting in Geneva on January 14, 2015.

Credit:

Rick Wilking/Reuters

While there's optimism that a nuclear deal with Iran is within reach, the battle between Tehran and Washington in cyberspace is only heating up.

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This story is based on a radio interview. Listen to the full interview.

That's according to a National Security Agency document from 2013 that was recently published by The Intercept.

"What the document has shown really, is that they are making contingency plans," says University of Surrey Professor Alan Woodward, a cybersecurity analyst and advisor to Europol, the international police agency. "What happens if the talks don't work? What else could we do?"

Woodward says many cyberweapons are attractive to use because they have an element of plausible deniability. "We still don't really know who launched Stuxnet," he points out. "Everyone assumes it was some or all of the United States, Israel and Great Britain — but actually no one really knows."

But, naturally, there are some down sides. If countries don't know the origins of the attacks, that allows other countries to stir the pot with what Woodward calls "false flag operations." For instance, if Country A wants Country B and C to go at it, it might launch an attack against Country B that looks like it came from Country C.

Woodward says such activities are commonplace in cyberwar and espionage activities conducted online. "It's horribly easy to do," he says. "Launch it from a site that seems to be well-known as being used by a country. All of a sudden you get circumstantial evidence, even though it's not a smoking gun, that starts to build up. And then you have confirmation bias. If you are already slightly against another country and there's some circumstantial evidence that starts to look like it was them then you are going to start believing that it was them."

The problem of tracing attacks is only one of many inherent to cyberweapons. For instance, any virus can be reverse-engineered by its target and used in turn against the attacker. "It's like biological warfare," Woodward says. "If you can capture the germ, you can grow it yourself and throw it back. Indeed, we saw it with Stuxnet. You can go on YouTube now and find videos on how to reengineer Stuxnet and send it back against some enemy."

And that capability is well within the reach of the US's potential

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enemies, Woodward warns. "You only need to put 30 clever guys in the room and give them laptops."